

(first we hold our breath) by TolkienGirl

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Summary: Steve knows a lot of things. He knows about the monster, and the Upside Down, and the way the world isn't what you all thought it was. He doesn't know that Barb is dead. (Stancy, pre-Season 2)

(first we hold our breath)

You don't even make it to Christmas. Dad's thrilled with his new furnace, but the air in the house feels dry and dull and choking. You're upstairs, and everything's too *warm*—you push Steve off you.

He props himself on his elbow. You are flat on your back, and the heat is pressing down on your eyelids. You feel a tear leak out of the corner of your eye, then another.

Steve's hand is in your hair. "Nance," he whispers. "What's wrong?"

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Steve knows a lot of things. He knows about the monster, and the Upside Down, and the way the world isn't what you all thought it was.

He doesn't know that Barb is dead.

.

Knees squeaking on the gym floor, water and salt and Eleven screaming.

There was no way, no time afterward, for her to tell you what she saw. Eleven is gone, but Barb is never coming back. You have no doubt of that.

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Once you start crying, you find that you can't stop. You don't have a name for this, except that it's somewhere between grief and trauma, how one minute you can be all over Steve and the next moment you don't just *want* to be alone, you *are* alone.

.

You didn't even say goodbye.

And she must have been sad before she—

It's all your fault. No matter how much time passes, that doesn't

change.

.

Steve doesn't want to leave you. You keep telling him to go, in between breaths that aren't quite breaths. But he won't stop holding you, and after a while you don't mind. You curl up against him, and your face is pressed against his chest, and *Steve doesn't know that she's dead—*

So you tell him.

.

He only says, "You're sure?"

It breaks you.

It breaks you, because you *are*.

.

Things change a little, after that. Less secret make-out sessions, more falling asleep with your head on his shoulder.

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Sometimes, you close your eyes and think of Jonathan. And Steve doesn't need to know that, Steve never asks—and you tell yourself that you're enough for him, even if there's a tiny part of you that keeps whispering that he's not enough for you.

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Christmas comes, and you put on a brave face. Sometimes you're happy, or close to it. Sometimes you go for long walks with Mike, and neither of you say anything. You lost your best friend; Mike lost someone else.

Your chest aches whenever you see Jonathan. He's like a ghost of a past self, of the Nancy who threw aside everything, who still thought Barb was—

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"I love you," Steve says. You're up in your room, on the floor in front of your bed, and your hands are linked together. You really *were* studying, this time.

"I love you too."

You think it probably shouldn't be so easy to say.

.

Damn the furnace.

You wake up, gasping, in the middle of the night, and your room is hot as hell. It's all hell.

But the dream was cold, and Barb was cold, and you can't—

You lie back down. Your bed is empty. You remember watching Jonathan wake up next to you, and how he had been able to sleep when you hadn't, as though that was something *you* gave to *him*.

.

You never go back to Steve's house. Even when his parents are gone, even when he wants you, he just—never asks.

At some point along the way, Steve stopped asking you for anything.

(He loves you.)

(You let him.)

That's your fault, too, but you let it slide, just this once.